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## Introduction

- 1 In recent contributions to the field of history of geography, an increasing number of papers question scientific translations (Araujo and Germes, 2016). These papers are informed by the approaches and methods of the spatial turn and/or critical approaches within the field of history of geography: the idea that place and space matter is thus applied to translations, considered as situated practices, made and received by situated actors, and engaged in various circulations (among editors, writers, translators and publics, for example). Translations can be seen as networks, which imply scientists, editors and translators located in different places and countries, creating a large number of mobilities (through correspondences, dialogues, travel, etc.) (Péaud, 2015). Geographers not only consider the materiality and mobility of translations, understood as objects, they increasingly question the epistemological and heuristic transformations that occur during the crossing of linguistic, national and scientific barriers (Houssay-Holzschuh and Milhaud, 2013; Mekdjian, 2017; Suchet and Mekdjian, 2017). Translation can also be part of critical reflections on linguistic hegemony and access to knowledge (Araujo and Germes, 2016). However, few of those papers directly raise the question of the style, which, even in scientific papers, is a major issue.
- 2 My contribution will concern the question of style in scientific papers and books, in the context of processes of translation. I will explore the case of the many translations of

Alexander von Humboldt's *Cosmos*, which is a good example of how a literary issue becomes intricate with a scientific one. Humboldt was a scientist of the late 18<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (1769-1859). He who extensively wrote in the fields of natural history, botany and geography. He prominently addressed the circulation of scientific knowledge. In his mind, the circulation of knowledge was as important as its writing. He therefore leant particular significance to the translation of his work.<sup>1</sup> He himself wrote in French or German but tried to disseminate his books and papers as widely as possible (Péaud, 2016). This is particularly true for the latest of his books, *Cosmos* (1845-1859), viewed by Humboldt as his master-piece. Originally written in German, the five volumes of *Cosmos* were translated and published abroad as soon as the first German volume is finished in 1845. Translated in 11 languages in 1859, in Europe and beyond, this example of scientific translation is relevant to understanding the material and ideal circulations of knowledge in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

- 3 In this paper, I consider how translation is not only a mobility from A to B, but also a transformation of the text at a discursive level and a hermeneutic process (Suchet and Mekdjian, 2016). The question of style is key here, because it considers that translation not only has an impact on the way to express an idea, but also (and as a consequence) may transform the scientific message (Schlottmann and Hannah, 2016). In that sense, translation is an epistemic as well as a heuristic operation.
- 4 In the space of this paper, I will mainly focus on the French and German translations of *Cosmos*.<sup>2</sup> Humboldt initially planned to deal with the French translation himself, but he quickly renounced the idea as too hard (Humboldt and Cotta, 2009). The translation was in the end undertaken by H. Faye and Ch. Galusky, and published by Gide, the habitual editor of Humboldt's work in Paris (Humboldt, 1846-1848; 1847-1852; 1848-1859).<sup>3</sup> In that case, the familiarity explains the choice of translators. The English translations are more complex, because several versions were planned and produced (see Fig. 1):

Figura 1. The English translations of *Cosmos*

Translators	Editors	Dates	Name of the book	Remarks
H.M. Williams	Stone (London)			Planned but never realized
A. Pritchard	Baillière (France)	1846-1849	<i>Kosmos: A general survey of the physical phenomena of the universe</i>	2 volumes
E.J. Sabine	Longman and Murray (London)	1846-1858	<i>Cosmos: Sketch of a physical description of the universe</i>	4 volumes
E.C. Otté	Bohn (London)	1849-1858	<i>Cosmos: a sketch of a physical description of the universe</i>	5 volumes

## Translation as a loss of style and content?

- 5 The question of style in translation and in scientific production is frequently put aside, as if it does not really matter from an epistemic perspective. However, recent

publications have shown that it is, on the contrary, central in the scientific process (Araujo and Germes, 2016). Humboldt was fully aware of this from the beginning of his career. His attention to the question reached a peak with his involvement himself in the process of translation.

- 6 While reading the correspondence between Humboldt and his editor, two major points of wondering appear regarding the *Cosmos*' translation's process (Humboldt and Cotta, 2009). This first one concerned the financial. As both Humboldt and Cotta were paying for the translation, the issue often led to arguments between the two men.<sup>4</sup> Besides financial questions, the issue of style and content of the translations seemed to be the most pregnant in Humboldt's mind.

- 7 Humboldt often wrote to his editor, Cotta, to express his fears. In 1845, at the beginning of the *Cosmos* project, he expressed his concerns about a French translation:

I am very afraid of a French translation: if the literary character is not properly given, it will be a pity for me and my reputation in this country, especially in that particular country where my translation is expected. The difficulty of translating *Cosmos* is of different kinds: 1° the scientific part will need a huge amount of knowledge which is not easy to find by one translator in France; 2° the people who know astronomy, geognosy, meteorology and the terminology of all these sciences are not competent to translate them with the style and the vitality in the literary part of the work. I have thought about it very seriously. (Humboldt and Cotta, 2009: 272)<sup>5</sup>

- 8 A few years later, Humboldt wrote again to Cotta with the same concern, but this time it was about Pritchard's translation (Humboldt and Cotta, 2009: 303). Regarding the progress of this particular translation, he was very happy with the work done by Sabine, the English translator hired to do the job:

The English translation of *Cosmos* by Sabine is really correct. (Humboldt and Cotta, 2009: 671)<sup>6</sup>

- 9 These extracts of his correspondence with Cotta show that Humboldt was concerned about a number of issues. Firstly, he was anxious about a lack of knowledge on the part of the translator, which often lead to Humboldt personally supervising the work done of translators. Secondly, he was afraid of a lack of precision in the use of terminology, which also led him to exert close control over the vocabulary used by the translators. Finally, Humboldt expressed fear regarding the literary art: scientific writings was, for him, a combination of precise facts and pleasing style; both were equally important.

- 10 In order to manage his fears, Humboldt developed different strategies. The first was a rigid control of what the translators did, when he himself had sufficient knowledge of the language, which was the case in French and English. It produced endless discussions with the translators and editors, leading sometimes to real arguments (Humboldt and Cotta, 2009). The second strategy was for Humboldt to himself write part of the translated volume. The French translation done by Faye is a good example of that strategy. That text remains quite unusual in terms of its editing processes, as in Faye's version the final text was written through the participation of several people, Humboldt included, which made the book a collective enterprise, which needed a European and pluri-disciplinary scientific network. The process of is recalled at the beginning of the book by Faye (the main translator):

M. von Humboldt translated the beginning himself, or more precisely he wrote in French a new introduction (...). Another part, concerning the question of human races, was translated by M. Guigniaut, Member of the Institut. That question was

too far from my usual studies (...). The remains are mine. I am happy to guarantee to the public the scientific exactitude of my translation, by proclaiming that M. Arago was kind enough to read and correct my drafts. (Faye, 1846: ii)<sup>7</sup>

- 11 One of the questions remained: how to guarantee a consistent scientific message when so many people worked on the same book? This question is valid for the French volume by Faye, even though Humboldt supervised the translation, but even more so for the translations undertaken without supervision.

## Translation as transformation

- 12 Behind the question of content and style, the issue of the transformations provoked by the translations has to also be asked. Humboldt himself was afraid that translated versions of his work would be different from the originals, not only because of the quality of the style, but also because it could lead to a loss of sense.
- 13 First of all, we can identify some small differences in the title(s) chosen by the translators and editors. The English ones are interesting: Pritchard choose *Kosmos: A general survey of the physical phenomena of the universe*, whereas Sabine wrote *Cosmos: Sketch of a physical description of the universe*, and Otté: *Cosmos: a sketch of a physical description of the universe*. The differences are not that important if we compare them to the original German title (*Kosmos. Entwurf einer physischen Weltbeschreibung*), though Pritchard's is quite far away from the original. Humboldt complained about it extensively (Humboldt and Cotta, 2009). The two others are pretty close to the original title, except the "a" before "sketch": the one proposed by Otté suggests, with the indefinite article that the translation is only a proposal, not a fixed entity. It recalls that it is a translation and not the original.
- 14 For the French ones, the differences are absent: *Cosmos, essai d'une description physique du monde* was used for both (Faye et Galusky), controlled by Humboldt, even if he was not particularly happy with the title. For him the major problem concerned the confusion between geography and cosmography, which for him was not at all the same idea, as he had explained to his friend François Arago in 1833:
- In German, that book is called *Cosmos* or *Sketch of 'physische Welt Beschreibung'*, because in German we say *Erdbeschreibung*, describing the Earth. In French we could only say *cosmographie* opposed to *géographie*, but that leads to other purely astronomical ideas; and *Essai sur la description physique du monde* seems ridiculous to me in French. (I enter in those details because I don't want a French translation of that book, which contains everything, from the nebula to the geography of races, to have a ridiculous title). (Humboldt and Arago, 1907: 133)<sup>8</sup>
- 15 Besides the titles, the main transformation concerns the numbering of the volumes, which differs greatly between the German and English editions. For example, volume 3 of the German edition corresponds to volumes 3 and 4 of the English translation, as the German volume was published in 2 parts in 1850 and 1851. The differences appear in the contents of the books too: Otté's translation benefited from a detailed table of contents and an index was added in every volume, whereas in the German edition only volumes 4 and 5 had (extremely short) tables of contents, and the index to the whole work only appeared with volume 5 in 1862. These examples show that the translated books are adapted to local habits and expectations of the English readers.

- 16 There are also some cuts in the texts, for example in the edition made by Pritchard. Humboldt expressed great anxiety about this, because he felt that it would drastically change the meaning of his book, even though the Pritchard translation was not the most popular in Great Britain. It is remarkable that Humboldt did not allow even the slightest cut in his *Cosmos*' translations, whereas he sometimes them in the translation of his *Relation historique du voyage aux régions équinoxiales du nouveau continent*<sup>9</sup>. Is it because *Cosmos* is the ultimate synthesis of his work? Probably. But the construction of the book was so precisely thought out by Humboldt that he likely could not bear the slightest modification.

## Conclusion

- 17 In conclusion, the issue of style is central to understanding the history of *Cosmos*'s translations in English as well as in French. It shows us that style should be taken more seriously in scientific writing, that it is not only a support to the ideas of geographers, but an integral part of geographical thoughts, concepts and works. Through the example of Humboldt's *Cosmos*, we are invited to attend more deeply to the question of poetics in our own work.

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## APPENDIXES

### 1° Editions of Cosmos used for the paper

Humboldt, A. de, 1845-1859, *Kosmos, Entwurf einer physichen Weltbeschreibung*, Stuttgart und Tübingen : J. G. Cotta , 1845-1862.

Humboldt, A. von, 1846-1849, *Kosmos: A general survey of the physical phenomena of the universe*, translated by A. Pritchard, Baillière, Paris, 2 vol.

Humboldt, A. von, 1846-1858, *Cosmos: Sketch of a physical description of the universe*, translated by E.J. Sabine, Longman and Murray, London, 4 vol.

Humboldt, A. von, 1846-1848, *Cosmos, essai d'une description physique du monde*, traduit par H. Faye et C. Galuski, Gide et Baudry, Paris, 2 vol.

Humboldt, A. von, 1847-1852, *Cosmos, essai d'une description physique du monde*, traduit par H. Faye et C. Galuski, Gide et Baudry, Paris, 4 vol.

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Humboldt, A. von, 1849-1858, *Cosmos: a sketch of a physical description of the universe*, translated by E.C. Otté, Bohn, London, 5 vol.

## NOTES

1. And the work of others, but this will not be the point of this particular paper. On this point, see: Humboldt and Cotta, 2009.
2. See the references of the different editions at the end of the paper.
3. Regarding the French translations, it is also worth noticing that many reeditions were published. This shows the editorial success of *Cosmos* in France.
4. This issue is not a minor one, Humboldt was actually almost ruined at the end of this life, mostly because of the cost of this translating enterprise.
5. Original version: «Ich habe grosse Furcht von einer französischen Uebersetzung, weil es für meine litterarische Eitelkeit am kränkensten wäre, wenn gerade in diesem Lande mein Ruf durch die Uebersetzung litte. Die Schwierigkeit den Kosmos zu übersetzen ist aber zwiegacher ganz verschiedener Art. 1° Der rein wissenschaftliche Theil verlangt eine Mannichfaltigkeit von Kenntnissen die bei einem Uebersetzer vergebens in Frankreich gesucht würde. 2° Die welche Astronomie, Geognosie, Meteorologie und die Terminologie dieser Wissenschaften kennen, sind ganz unfähig mit Geschmack und Lebendigkeit die rein litterarische Theile zu übersezen. Ich habe sehr ernsthaft darüber nachgedacht, wie diese. » NB : the translations of the citations are given by the author of the paper.

6. Original version : « Die englische Uebersetzung des Kosmos von Sabine ist sehr correct ».

7. “M. de Humboldt a traduit lui-même les prolégomènes, ou plutôt il a écrit en français une nouvelle introduction (p. 1-78) ; c’est un gage de plus de la sympathie qui unit depuis si longtemps à notre pays l’illustre voyageur, et qui lui a fait donner à la France ses plus importants ouvrages. Une autre partie, relative à la question des races humaines, a été traduite par M. Guigniaut, Membre de l’Institut. Cette question était étrangère à mes études habituelles ; d’ailleurs elle a été traitée, dans l’ouvrage allemand, avec une telle supériorité de vue et de style, que M. Humboldt a dû chercher, parmi ses amis, l’homme le plus capable d’en donner l’équivalent aux lecteurs français. M. de Humboldt s’est naturellement adressé à M. Guigniaut, et ce savant a bien voulu se charger de traduire les dix dernières pages du texte, ainsi que les notes correspondantes. Le reste m’appartient. Heureusement, je puis offrir au lecteur une garantie de l’exactitude de ma traduction, au point de vue scientifique, en déclarant que M. Arago a bien voulu revoir et corriger toutes mes épreuves. » (Humboldt, 1846-1848 : ii, introduction by H. Faye).

8. « En allemand, ce livre s’appelle Cosmos ou Essai de « physische Welt Beschreibung », parce qu’en allemand on dit Erdbeschreibung, description de la terre. En français on ne pourrait dire par opposition à géographie que cosmographie, ce qui conduit à d’autres idées purement astronomiques ; et Essai sur la description physique du monde me paraît ridicule en français. (J’entre dans ces détails parce que je ne voudrais pas qu’une traduction française de ce livre qui embrasse tout, depuis les nébuleuses jusqu’à la géographie des races aye un titre ridicule.) ».

9. On this matter, see the letters exchanged with Marc Auguste Pictet in 1805 (Humboldt, 1905). Published from 1814 to 1825, that book was very successful throughout Europe, which led Humboldt to engage translations of it. In that case, he accepted cuts in the content, in particular for the German version.

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## ABSTRACTS

This paper illustrates a relative unconsidered aspect of Alexander von Humboldt’s life and work: translation. Humboldt was however very aware of the importance of translation as a way to diffuse geographical knowledge. If this question concerns many actors (translators, editors especially) and draws networks around Humboldt, it is also shaped by an epistemic, heuristic and stylistic issues. This paper will precisely focus on the stylistic aspect of the translation of the *Cosmos*, Humboldt’s masterpiece.

Cet article illustre une dimension relativement peu explorée de la vie et du travail d’Alexander von Humboldt : la traduction. Humboldt était pourtant très conscient de l’importance de cette pratique, comme façon de diffuser la connaissance géographique. Si cet enjeu concerne des acteurs nombreux (des traducteurs et éditeurs en particuliers), il contribue aussi à dessiner des réseaux autour d’Humboldt, il s’agit aussi d’une question de nature épistémique, heuristique et stylistique. Le propos se concentre précisément sur l’enjeu du style autour de la traduction de *Cosmos*, le chef-d’œuvre de Humboldt.

O presente artigo ilustra uma dimensão relativamente pouco explorada da vida e da obra de Alexander von Humboldt: a tradução. A despeito disto, Humboldt era muito consciente dessa prática como forma de difusão do conhecimento geográfico. Se tal questão envolve vários atores



(particularmente tradutores e editores, porém), ela também contribui para o desenho de redes ao redor de Humboldt, além de ser uma questão de natureza epistêmica, heurística e estilística. Nosso trabalho concentra-se precisamente sobre o aspecto estilístico que cerca a tradução da obra-prima de Humboldt, o *Cosmos*.

Este artículo ilustra una dimensión relativamente inexplorada de la vida y la obra de Alexander von Humboldt: la traducción. Sin embargo, Humboldt era muy consciente de la importancia de esta práctica como medio de difusión de los conocimientos geográficos. Si esta cuestión concierne a numerosos actores (traductores y editores en particular), también contribuye a dibujar redes en torno a Humboldt, y es también una cuestión de carácter epistémico, heurístico y estilístico. Este artículo se centra en la cuestión estilística que rodea a la traducción de *Cosmos*, la obra maestra de Humboldt.

## INDEX

**Mots-clés:** Alexandre de Humboldt, traduction, Cosmos, style, circulation

**Palabras claves:** Alexander von Humboldt, traducción, Cosmos, estilo, circulación

**Palavras-chave:** Alexander von Humboldt, tradução, Cosmos, estilo, circulação

**Keywords:** Alexander von Humboldt, translation, Cosmos, style, circulation

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